

EAST OREGONIAN

Founded October 16, 1875

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OUR VIEW

The curious case of the sacked EQC board

In a move that defies both logic and comprehension, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown abruptly fired three members of the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission.

This is the latest episode of the governor's meddling in the business of a supposedly independent state commission.

Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, had it right when he said, "We cannot have the governor of our beautiful state firing Senate-confirmed volunteer members of a commission, simply because they don't do what she wants them to do."

Legally, a governor has the authority to fire political appointees, including commission members. But such actions should be exceedingly rare and must be fully explained. Oregonians deserve that, especially given Brown's professed commitment to transparency.

Nothing about her action makes sense. That includes the press release issued by her office on Wednesday. It announced her appointment of three new members to the Environmental Quality Commission, thanked the three departing members, avoided saying they had been fired, and gave no clue to her reasoning — including why she kept two members.

But the political infighting seems to come down to the commission's recent hiring of Richard Whitman to head the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, an agency that has endured rough times. Whitman is a former aide to Brown and Gov. John Kitzhaber, and a former director of the state Department of Land Conservation and Development. He served as acting DEQ director so it is not surprising that the commission unanimously gave him the permanent job after conducting a national search.

Brown's staff said she was dissatisfied with the selection process — that it took too long and was insufficiently "collaborative"

with the governor's office. Yet they said Brown had confidence in Whitman's abilities.

The first part of the governor's concern may highlight a flaw in the hiring process — that independent commissions and semi-autonomous agencies, which abound in state government, might lack the expertise and resources to adequately manage top-level hiring. That concern deserves a close look by the Legislature during the final three months of its 2017 session.

But the question of "collaboration" is deeply troubling. State law clearly says the governor shall appoint the commission members, the state Senate shall decide whether to confirm those appointments, and the commission shall appoint the DEQ director.

Given that Whitman is in place and Brown professes confidence in him, why now sack a majority of the commissioners?

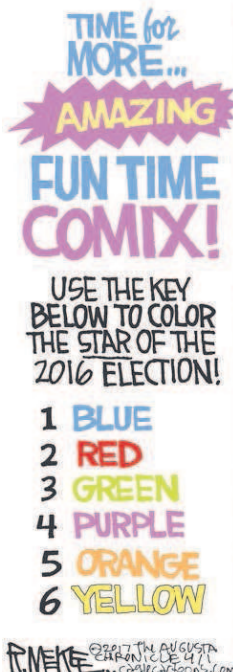
The ousted commissioners say it's because Brown did not want them to appoint Whitman. They also say that Brown was late in making her desires known.

Even if those allegations are only partially true, they raise serious questions about how much involvement a governor should have in a supposedly independent commission.

Brown has been at odds with the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission over gillnetting in the Columbia River. She also defied her fellow members of the State Land Board in ordering the Division of State Lands to create a plan for keeping the Elliott State Forest in public ownership. As in this latest instance, her rationale was not fully explained.

The trend is disturbing. Oregonians have wanted stronger leadership from Gov. Brown. But her sacking of three EQC commissioners smacks of retribution, not leadership.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



OTHER VIEWS

The strange persistence of guilt

In 1981, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre opened his book "After Virtue" with a passage that is now famous. Imagine if we lost the theoretical coherence of science. Imagine if we still used scientific words like neutrino and atomic weight, but had no overall framework to explain how they fit together.

That's the state of our moral discourse today, he suggested. We still use words describing virtue and vice, but without any overall metaphysics. Religious frameworks no longer organize public debate. Secular philosophies that grew out of the Enlightenment have fallen apart. We have words and emotional instincts about what feels right and wrong, but no settled criteria to help us think, argue and decide. That diagnosis seemed accurate to many people, and it seemed to point toward a culture of easygoing relativism. With no common criteria by which to judge moral action we'd all become blandly nonjudgmental — sort of chill, pluralistic versions of Snoop Dogg: You do you and I'll do me and we'll all be cool about it. Whatever feels right.

But that's not what's happened. We haven't entered the age of milquetoast bourgeois relativism. Instead, society has become a free-form demolition derby of moral confrontation: the cold-eyed fanaticism of students at Middlebury College and other campuses nationwide; the rage of the alt-right; holy wars over transgender bathrooms; the furious intensity at every town-hall meeting on every subject.

American life has secularized and grand political ideologies have fallen away, but moral conflict has only grown. In fact, it's the people who go to church least — like the members of the alt-right — who seem the most fervent moral crusaders. We're living in an age of great moral pressure, even if we lack the words to articulate it. In fact, as Wilfred McClay points out in a brilliant essay called "The Strange Persistence of Guilt" for The Hedgehog Review, religion may be in retreat, but guilt seems as powerfully present as ever.

Technology gives us power and power entails responsibility, and responsibility, McClay notes, leads to guilt: You and I see a picture of a starving child in Sudan and we know inwardly that we're not doing enough. "Whatever donation I make to a charitable organization, it can never be as much as I could have given. I can never diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough. ... Colonialism, slavery, structural poverty, water pollution, deforestation — there's an endless list of items for which you and I can take the rap."

McClay is describing a world in which we're still driven by an inextinguishable need to feel morally justified. Our thinking



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

is still vestigially shaped by religious categories.

And yet we have no clear framework or set of rituals to guide us in our quest for goodness. Worse, people have a sense of guilt and sin, but no longer a sense that they live in a loving universe marked by divine mercy, grace and forgiveness. There is sin but no formula for redemption.

The only reliable way to feel morally justified in that culture is to assume the role of victim. As McClay puts it, "Claiming victim status is the sole sure means left of absolving oneself and securing one's sense of fundamental moral innocence."

"If one wishes to be accounted innocent, one must find a way to make the claim that one cannot be held morally responsible. This is precisely what the status of victimhood accomplishes."

I'd add that this move takes all moral striving and it politicizes it. Instead of seeing moral struggle as something between you and God (the religious version) or as something that happens between the good and evil within yourself (the classical version), moral struggle now happens primarily between groups.

We see events through the lens of moral Marxism, as a class or ethnic struggle between the evil oppressor and the supposedly innocent oppressed. The moral narrative of colonialism is applied to every situation. The concept of inherited sin is back in common currency, only these days we call it "privilege."

As the political scientist Thomas U. Berger put it, "We live in an age of apology and recrimination." The conflicts on campus take on a Salem witch trial intensity. In the Middle East, the Israelis and the Palestinians compete for the victimhood narrative. Even America's heartland populists see themselves as the victims of the oppressive coastal elites. Steve Bannon is the Frantz Fanon of the whites.

Sin is a stain, a weight and a debt. But at least religions offer people a path from self-reflection and confession to atonement and absolution. Mainstream culture has no clear path upward from guilt, either for individuals or groups. So you get a buildup of scapegoating, shaming and Manichaean condemnation. "This is surely a moral crisis in the making," McClay writes.

I notice some schools and prisons have restorative justice programs to welcome offenders back into the community. They tend to be more substantive than the cheap grace of instant forgiveness. I wonder if the wider society needs procedures like that, so the private guilt everybody feels isn't transmuted into a public state of perpetual moral war.

David Brooks has been a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, a contributing editor at Newsweek and the Atlantic Monthly, and he is currently a commentator on "The Newshour with Jim Lehrer."

YOUR VIEWS

Hermiston schools just trying to keep up with demand

The Hermiston School District and the Hermiston community faces a challenge of dealing with significant growth in student enrollment, a challenge that most districts in Eastern Oregon don't have. For other school districts, their major challenge is determining how to continue to provide a quality educational experience when the funding of their general fund is reduced because of their declining enrollment.

For Hermiston, the challenge is providing adequate classroom space for all of the students that enter the halls of our schools. Of these two challenges, we much prefer dealing with the challenge of growth rather than dealing with budget cuts.

The community continues to grow bringing more students in to our school system. The proposed bond will provide for improved safety for our students and also provide the classroom space to educate our students.

Please join us in voting yes on the Hermiston School Bond in the May 16th election. The education of the youth of our community must continue to be a focus for us all and is something we must all commit to funding.

Steve and Janet Williams
Hermiston

Special meeting to focus on tribal spending

Just like the U.S. Constitution, our Umatilla Tribal Constitution gives our tribal citizens the right to "peaceably assemble" to address tribal governance issues. Thus, a proper petition has been filed with the tribal government to

convene a special General Council meeting. The meeting will be at 2:00 p.m. on Thursday, April 6, 2017, at the tribal governance center.

There are legitimate questions on some of the decisions that tribal officials have made on how tribal funds are used. A tribal member recently wrote in our tribal newspaper about some concerns on financial issues. The special meeting will be an opportunity for grass-roots tribal members to ask legitimate questions on their concerns on tribal spending. I know I have concerns.

Bob Shippentower
Pendleton

Compromise for the Pendleton fire station

I have a compromise to the \$10 million bond issue.

I think that the majority of voters and even the fire personnel will agree that the old theater site is the best place for fire protection. It is twice as big as the present fire station. Southwest Second Street could be closed for one block next to station, and the lot next to Baxter Auto on Second Street could be used for training; I don't think Baxter or Western Auto would object. Also, there is a large city-owned parking lot across the street that could be used for parking or training, close to the population center for ambulance service and fire protection, and near downtown with old multi-story buildings that need quick fire response.

I would be willing to support a \$5 million bond for this site if the city council of Pendleton would forgo their 3 percent raise or assessed value for two years and look to cut costs for the taxpayers of Pendleton and make police, fire and streets their top priority. I think \$5 million is enough for

a fire station that would meet Pendleton's needs for the foreseeable future.

As far as equipment for the fire department, they should never be short of lifesaving equipment. We pay \$2.60 per month for public safety; this has been enough for years for fire equipment. Last year the council voted to buy police cars instead of the lifesaving equipment that the fire chief says we need.

We need to defeat this excessive \$10 million bond issue. Then we can have a real discussion about how to take care of our long-term fire protection and police protection for our city.

Rex J. Morehouse
Pendleton

How many chances will Rep. Walden get?

Perhaps at Congressman Walden's urging, county GOP chairs in the Second District are writing opinion letters that not only defend him, but claim there is some sort of campaign by a dark out-of-state organization to "smear" poor Greg in the pages of local newspapers. Nonsense. For the record, I'm one individual, and am not part of any anti-Walden "conspiracy." I am simply a lone letter writer who wants to share his views with fellow voters elsewhere in the Second

District. So here goes:

Our congressman's fingerprints are all over the recent "Repeal/Replace" legislation, something so poorly conceived that it never came to a vote. Greg was a major author of that debacle of a bill. His bill ("Waldencare?") would have left millions of low-income people without insurance, while — get this — giving huge tax breaks for the very, very wealthy.

Now Greg's gone and done it again! At the urging of big GOP donors, he's voted to repeal our internet privacy protections. These are protections that even extreme conservatives say were among of the best things to come out of the Obama years.

Twenty years ago, freshman Congressman Walden was a decent guy, a relatively moderate-conservative. Since then, like a jellyfish, he's drifted off into a distant current, where only the desires of the rich and powerful seem to matter.

Will voters continue to fall for this, election after election? "You can fool some of the people all of the time." But maybe, just maybe, try reading some true, principled conservative columnists like Michael Gerson, Kathleen Parker, and Jennifer Rubin. They gave Obama hell for eight years. Today, their disgust at the cynicism of Trump, Ryan, and Walden is profound.

Jeff LaLande
Talent

LETTERS POLICY

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